

# Women are at the forefront of Oman's contemporary art scene

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Oman Pavilion at Venice Biennale

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Women artists are gaining more and more relevance and traction in the contemporary art scene in Oman. Although the history of Omani women in art is fairly recent, their work conveys their singular experience and perspective within a continuously evolving culture. Their artworks are also truly innovative in terms of the use of new technologies and their aesthetics; they're aligned with the latest trends in contemporary art, yet steeped in historical research.

The international public has started to realise this. The catalyst was this year's Venice Biennale, the biggest event in the art world. The debut Oman pavilion — which included three women out of its five artists — brought together the work of three generations of Omani artists, spanning five decades of modern and contemporary visual art in the country.

"It's the first time that Oman has a pavilion in Venice, so it's something very special, and we are proud to have three women," pavilion curator Aisha Stoby explained. She specialises in modern and contemporary art from the West Asian region. "Many of the works in the Oman pavilion were inspired by specific elements in the country, which was not part of the original concept, but was a very welcome happenstance."

Stoby told me how very happy she is to have brought these images of women into the pavilion. She added that she choose female voices to articulate human and universal themes. "Whether it's memory and nostalgia or how we relate with our environment, or the future of art, what I hope is that viewers will be able to relate and deeply feel what these artists were expressing."

The latter included Budoor Al-Riyami, a pupil of Anwar Sonya and a contemporary of Hassan Meer — both pioneering Omani artists present at the Venice pavilion — whose current practice focuses on photography and video installation. Muscat-based Al-Riyami started working with painting and sculpture, then transitioned to photography and video installation. She came to the forefront of the local art scene in 2008, winning the Grand Prize at the 13th Asian Art Biennale with a video installation entitled "The Peak of Burning". This was one of the first artworks from the Middle East employing the latest technologies, making her a leader in encouraging new forms of art in Oman and the Gulf.

"In the Stone Age man used to draw on stone," she pointed out, "so why shouldn't we use modern technologies when science has developed?" Viewers, she said, should be allowed some space so that they can interpret art in their own ways. "As an artist I can give them some clues on any

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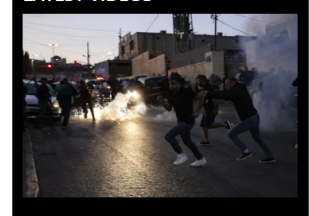
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particular issue, but they should decide now to react."

According to Stoby, Al-Riyami has a "very innovative and diverse" practice going from calligraphy to video, always with a poetic approach. "At the Biennale she presented a commissioned work called 'Breathe', which evokes the process of breathing. We see five sculptures, similar to rocks hanging with thin strings from the pavilion's ceiling. On the gallery floor, right beneath the sculptures, a water-like liquid is poured, in which the reflection of a video screen near the ceiling is visible."

The work of Radhika Khimji in the Oman Pavilion is also very striking. An installation called "Under, Inner, Under" includes seven fabrics with detailed paintings, a wooden sculpture, two wooden paintings and structures attached like tiles. "Her work explores agency," noted Stoby. "She asks to what extent we are a result of our environments. Or is it the other way around; that we shaped our environment? Each work presented here is inspired by Oman's landscapes in a way that each is supposed to embody a part of the country's geography. What we see by Khimji in this presentation is in relation to those landscapes."

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In another part of the pavilion we can find "Speed of Art", an installation created between 2017 and 2022 featuring the work of leading curator and artist Raiya Al-Rawahi, who passed away in 2017. The video screen is like an airplane window, and its content refers to the relationship between art and technology.

The film features artist Anwar Sonya speaking about the importance of artistic creation in the face of the appearance of robots and the impending presence of the "technologisation" of creation. "The artwork is not meant to be optimistic," said Stoby, "but Anwar gave a powerful performance that introduced hope."

Scholar and artist Fakhriya Al-Yahyai from Sultan Qaboos University in Muscat wrote in the *International Journal of Arts Theory and History* that Omani women have not been too far behind in the fine arts movement that first began in the country in the mid-1970s. "Women's participation in fine arts was marginal and limited only to Muscat. However, during the 1980s and 1990s, a number of prodigies appeared and became role models for the fine art movement in Oman."

She notes that the first female participation in a fine art exhibition was at an exhibition held in October 1989. Since that time women's participation was obvious. The Omani Fine Art Society (OFAS) was established in 1993 and the presence of female fine artists intensified further, as the society encouraged women to practice fine arts. "Today, the number of women registered at the OFAS outweighs the number of men, which makes the Omani women artists an appropriate case to be looked at."



Oman - Eman Ali, succession

A look at history is also what characterises the work of young artist Eman Ali, one of the most controversial creatives from the region, due to her unfiltered and empowered representation of women, as well as underlying political themes. Her latest project, *Succession*, is a book that was created by collecting visual archives from the 1970s. That was the first decade of the late Sultan Qaboos Bin Said's rule, which has shaped the Omani nation and is inseparable from its contemporary history.

Eman found her first inspiration for the book in her father's collection of publications called *Oman*. These were newsletters published by the Omani Embassy in London during the 1970s and 80s to inform people within diplomatic circles what was going on in terms of the development of a new modern state, presenting Sultan Qaboos as a "Renaissance Man".

"I was immediately drawn to these publications because they served as a time capsule, a record of an era coming to an end," she said. "The images themselves were so arresting that I knew I had to archive them somehow." To preserve them, she decided to scan them in hi-resolution front to back. The images were then reworked to create a series of cropped images arranged into a sequence, which eventually became a book.

This was the first time that she has put a book together, and the first time that she worked with archival images. "It was a challenge that inspired me to create. The book for me was a way to question my own understanding of the modern history of Oman, to explore the unreliability of memory, and to show the important role photography had in reinforcing a new national identity." Her hope, she added, is to inspire women through her life and art. "I hope to inspire women, especially those living in Oman, to be brave, to push against the grain, and to harness the power

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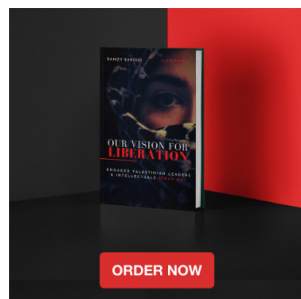
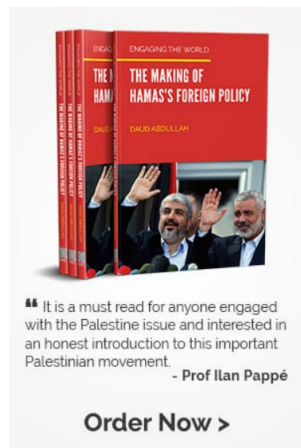
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of their own voice and creativity."

Al-Yahyai has concluded that we can say proudly that the Omani fine artists, especially women, have made much headway in the fine arts movement. "We can expect Omani women artists to be more and more open to the world and constantly developing through various interactions and experiences."



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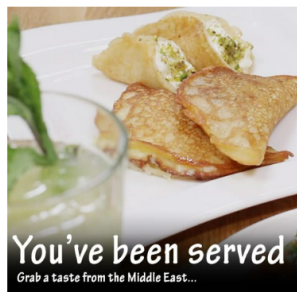
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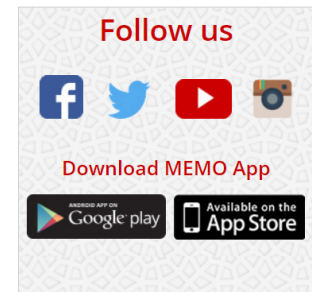


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